

July 3, 2009 - Heavy Hitters Voice Support

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By Christine Haines, Herald-Standard

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REDSTONE TWP. - Hopes for a rejuvenated Brownsville Tri-County Hospital were presented Thursday to state, county, local and federal officials, with some heavy-hitting support for the proposal.

What had been announced as a meeting about the future of Brownsville Tri-County Hospital involving U.S. Rep John P. Murtha, D-Johnstown, and U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, D-PA, and the commissioners from Fayette, Greene and Washington counties was instead a major pitch for reopening the hospital.

Noted forensic pathologist Dr. Cyril Wecht voiced his support, saying that in his experience, people die when they are too far away from a primary medical center. He also offered to come on board as the chief executive officer of a diabetes prevention program at the hospital when it reopens.

Dr. Roger Vega talked about his plans to start a prostate cancer prevention program in Brownsville, while Chris Wolfe of Via Quest voiced his commitment to providing youth drug and alcohol treatment at the facility. Wolfe said he first saw the hospital in

January, when it was still open.

"What we were touched by was the dedication of this board," Wolfe said. "This is infectious. This is a group of folks we can believe in."

The board of directors includes many of the same people who in 2005 sought options to keep Brownsville General Hospital open, eventually opting to sell the nonprofit hospital to a group of private investors, including several doctors. That group was given court approval to purchase the hospital in 2006 and ran the hospital until closing it in January 2007 and filing for bankruptcy.

Nearly everything in the hospital was auctioned off as part of the bankruptcy proceedings, with the nonprofit board buying as much of the furniture and equipment as possible in an attempt to reopen the hospital. The hospital did reopen in May 2008, but closed again in February when it was unable to meet its payroll and other expenses. It has since entered reorganizational bankruptcy, with the hope of coming back as a full-service hospital.

Frank Ricco, chairman of the hospital board, said the immediate need is for money to keep the lights on and to pay off a debt from the initial bankruptcy case that must be settled by November or the hospital real estate could be forfeited to settle the debt. Ricco said that with the debt settled, the hospital could obtain the private loans and other funding it needs to restore 150 jobs to the area. Ricco said that while the hospital is asking for grant money, in essence it would be repaid to the government.

"We're going to pay it back to you in taxes," Ricco said.

"You don't have to sell it to us, you have to show me how it's viable," Murtha said. "We want to make sure if we're going to invest taxpayers' money, you're going to make it."

It was pointed out that the nearest medical facilities are 12 to 15 miles away.

"It is very depressing what the needs are with respect to the travel times to other facilities," Specter said. "There are resources available with the stimulus plan and I will talk to Gov. (Ed) Rendell about it."

Murtha and Specter both said the medical and economic need of the area is evident, but the economic viability of the hospital remains in question.

"There is a business plan," said Walter Wally, who has served as both

a primary contractor for renovations at the hospital and as an executive officer of the hospital. "We have a \$25 million package that shows what needs to be done. We believe if we had an urgent care, as well as an emergency room, it would take three years or so, but we could ramp up."

Long-term plans include a wellness center, as well as the diabetes and prostate cancer prevention centers and youth drug and alcohol program, as well as other services.

Bob Logue, who has been serving as a volunteer with the hospital, said initial money would be needed to upgrade the ventilation system in the operating room to meet current regulations and to finish upgrading the intensive care unit. Logue said not having a functional operating room limited the hospital this past year, though 17,000 people used the hospital in the eight months it was open.

Lambert Rosenbaum, the southwest area director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program, said he was impressed with the level of community support for the hospital.

"You're the community leaders people elected, and you're committed. I want to be part of that. We're going to look at the math side of it. You don't want to send good money after bad," Rosenbaum said.

Murtha said he wanted Rosenbaum at the meeting to review the hospital's business plan. Ricco said the plan would be ready for presentation in the next few weeks.